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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is the effects of a School Improvement Plan (SIP) on an urban elementary school. The school's regular education teachers were required to participate in one of five committees designed to prepare the SIP, which specified goals for improvement and the strategies for reaching them. Classroom observations were used by the researchers as the basis for teacher interviews and interviews with the principal. Interviews with nine teachers were used to create a survey for the remaining teachers to complete. Eighteen of the nineteen regular education teachers completed this survey, and their agreement with the opinions of the interviewed teachers was high. A list of factors that contributed to the ease and swiftness with which staff consensus was reached on restructuring activities was prepared. It includes: (1) increased staff collegiality; (2) increased interaction with community members; (3) increased teacher-student identification; (4) teacher participation in the reform effort; (5) consensus building workshops; and (6) the understanding that the SIP was not written in stone. Many of these factors reflect strong and effective leadership from the principal. Appendixes contain the coding schemes for the observations and the interviews. (Contains 1 table and 20 references.) (SLD)

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Overcoming Obstacles to Urban School Reform

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Paper presented at the 1998 AERA Conference, San Diego

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Introduction

Most research on effective urban schools approaches the issue by documenting the characteristics that seem to distinguish them from their low-achieving counterparts. Many of these studies note that the special challenges of urban schools are student poverty, hunger, and health problems, large enrollment, limited resources, inadequate equipment and facilities, high faculty turnover, low teacher expectations, low morale, less experienced teachers than in suburban schools, and low parent involvement (Anyon, 1997; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Kozol, 1991; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Barth, 1990, and Lareau, 1989).

Within urban schools literature we also find characterizations of teaching that are believed to contribute to poor student learning and low achievement. Listed among characteristics of this "pedagogy of poverty" are frequent interruptions, giving information (rather than engaging students in acquiring it), reviewing assignments and tests in class (rather than focusing on new material to be learned), and the large amount of time spent settling disputes and punishing non-compliance (Haberman, 1991). According to Haberman, these teaching acts constitute the core functions of urban teaching and contribute greatly to the low student achievement demonstrated in these schools.

In an attempt to understand the factors which distinguish effective schools from ineffective ones, many researchers have expended considerable energy and resources documenting the characteristics of schools from each category. Most effective schools studies look closely at schools that have already demonstrated themselves as successful, and suggest or imply that following the same practices will increase the effectiveness of struggling schools. Membership in each category is largely determined by the results of standardized tests of achievement. Institutional and instructional correlates of high scores are then translated into lists of suggestions which are expected to serve as the goals of school improvement efforts.

Many reports offer generalized advice on how to institute effective practices. Included in this advice to teachers and administrators are suggestions that they develop strong administrative leadership, increase planning, develop safe, orderly and well-disciplined environments; design

effective teacher development programs; increase teacher self-efficacy and responsibility; develop adaptive teaching skills; increase parent involvement; develop high expectations; and develop students' test taking skills/reduce test taking anxiety (DuFour, 1997; Waxman & Huang, 1997; Gursky, 1990; Knapp & Shields, 1990; Knapp, Turnbull, & Shields, 1990; Levine and Lezotte 1990, McPartland & Slavin, 1990; School Improvement Program, 1990; and Griswold, Cotton, & Hansen, 1986).

Studies on urban and effective schools provide an abundance of information on what is being done and what researchers think should be done. What they do not provide in great quantity are specific suggestions on how schools might accomplish them. It seems that if these suggestions were easy to achieve in urban schools, there would not be such a large difference in the practices of urban and suburban, effective and ineffective schools. These generalized suggestions often do not address the special challenges of urban schools mentioned above or provide support for reforming within the constraints urban schools face. Without specific attention to the special circumstances of urban schools, institutional and instructional reform becomes an especially daunting task. More attention needs to be given to helping these schools overcome obstacles to instituting effective practices.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the problems and obstacles plaguing one improving urban elementary school have, and are being, overcome by administrators and teachers. As with other studies on school effectiveness, this study uses scores on the state standardized achievement test as an indicator of school success. We did not use MEAP results as an absolute indicator of school effectiveness or reform adequacy. We looked for moderate to large increases in scores to give us clues as to which schools might be improving due to a reform effort. This school, which is still in the process of improvement, was only compared against its own past performance on the Michigan MEAP assessment.

Description of the Site

This community school is located in an urban mid-western city. It was once a prosperous city built to provide residence for the many workers in its factories, but it faced the fate of many

urban American centers. Industrial downsizing and relocation combined with middle-class flight to the suburbs to produce a declining city. When the factories left the city, unemployment rates soared and economic devastation took hold. The city is still suffering the negative effects of losing a large portion of its industrial base. In the chart below we can see that the school has a high rate of student poverty as measured by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. We can also see that the turn-around rate for students is incredibly high. According to the principal, the student to teacher ratio has recently declined in response to the district's maximum allowance of 17:1, but the number of students has been increasing ever since the school became a school of choice.

YEAR	F & R LUNCH%	STF/1000 TURN% ENRL	PUPILS	EXPEND (\$)	AVGSAL (\$)
95-96	61.3	433	78.5		
94-95	60.2	351	87.7	3,672	16,377
93-94	55.0	387	71.8	2,774	38,898

*Source: Michigan Department of Education

As is common in situations such as this, where the declining tax-base leads to an eroding urban infrastructure, the school began to struggle and student achievement on the state standardized assessment plummeted (From the Year 2002, 1997 District Vision Statement). We became interested in the changes being made at the school after noticing a large increase in the number of students receiving satisfactory ratings on the MEAP reading section between 1993 and 1995 (See Table 1). An interview with the principal early in the Spring of 1997 revealed that this school had recently undergone some administrative changes and a reform effort had begun. Because the reform is largely motivated by pressure from the district to improve MEAP scores, we expected that the reform effort would be geared towards the MEAP. For this reason, we decided not to focus on the increase in the scores, but to instead investigate the process of coming to consensus about the content of the reform document, the School Improvement Plan (SIP).

We decided to study, post-hoc, the process that led to the development of the unified vision and practice seen in this school. While we realize the limitations of a post-hoc examination of a process, we decided that this study should be undertaken not only because of the information we can gain about the past, but for the understanding it would provide as the ongoing process of school improvement and the creation of SIPs continues.

The School Improvement Plan

According to the principal, "The School Improvement Plan is a document required by the state that outlines the short and long term goals of the school. Every school in the state has to have one. It is supposed to be like an operating manual or focusing device for instruction." A new one must be created each year. Between 1992 (her first year at the school) and 1995, the principal created this document with the advice of a small group of teachers. In 1995 she turned the task over to the teachers.

The regular education teachers were required to join one of five committees. The special education teachers also had the option of joining the Inclusion committee. The committees available were Reading, Writing, Technology, Math, and Science. Teachers signed up for the committees on a first-come-first-served basis. The committee members then decided among themselves who would be the chair. These committees met, decided on goals, and presented their suggestions to the rest of the staff. The suggestions were then discussed. The selected goals and strategies were written into the School Improvement Plan. This document was submitted to the district by September 1st of the school year to which it applied.

The 4 improvement goals and strategies adopted by the staff for the 1997-98 school year were:

- All students will demonstrate the ability to communicate in written form
- All students will demonstrate the ability to construct and reflect using increased scientific knowledge.
- All students will demonstrate a basic understanding of how to accurately select and apply appropriate math skills to solve problems

- All students will be able to distinguish structures of expository text and apply various reading strategies to construct meaning for effective reading.

These goals represent the interpretation, within this school, of the district and state board of education goals listed in the table below:

Goal	District	Board
1	Develop a community of learners who, who through written communication are prepared to live, work, and contribute in a changing society	Demonstrate improvement in written communication as a result of strategies provided by the teachers
2	Develop a community of learners who are prepared to live, work, and contribute in an ever changing society	Demonstrate improvement in knowledge, understanding, and applications of mathematical and scientific processes through delivery of improved teaching methods
3	Develop a community of learners who are prepared to live, work, and contribute in an ever changing society	Demonstrate improvement in the application of thinking (process) strategies in all areas as a result of designing and aligning the core academic curriculum, instruction, and assessment
4	The ability to read will prepare and equip learners with the necessary tools to live and work as productive contributors in an ever changing society	Demonstrate improvement in communication skills as a result of effective reading and language arts strategies used by classroom teachers

The SIP goals and strategies are also linked to the goals in the Goals 2000 document, and the District Student Exit Outcomes for adults educated in the district. Because the Board of Education's goals emphasize curricular and instructional alignment with assessment (which currently consists of the MEAP and the MAT), it is not surprising that the outcome goals listed in the SIP relate to performance on these tests.

From the generality of the goals outlined by the district and the board, it is not difficult to see that the interpretation of appropriate courses of action could vary widely across schools as well as within. Arriving at school-wide agreement for specific courses of action can be a

harrowing experience for educators and often in urban schools, is not accomplished with a great degree of success.

After the improvement goals are adopted, the committees further define them in terms of objectives and specific strategies. Those for the **Goal #4** are listed below.

Objective 1) All students will read from expository text in various student interest areas.

Objective 2) All students will have the opportunity to work with volunteers on expository reading.

Objective 3) Students will be exposed to and have a better understanding of expository reading.

Strategies for achieving the goals are documented in the Strategy Form for each goal.

These strategies are spread across six areas. These include:

- Academic strategy: All students will use graphic organizers (story maps, concept maps, etc.) when working with expository reading.
- Gender Equity strategy: Staff awareness of the significant differences in scores and selection of expository readings that reflect a more generic interest.
- Technology Strategy: All students will have access to software on the computer that will allow them to read from various types of expository texts.
- On-the-Job Opportunities strategy: Not applicable at the elementary level.
- Community Resources Strategy: All student will attend programs that focus on various careers and the importance of reading expository texts in their particular field.
- Strategy evaluations: Formative assessment, student interest surveys to select readings, teacher feedback in staff meetings to inform the planning of thematic units, and collection of mini session surveys.

The SIP also contains sections outlining who is responsible for helping the school to reach the goals, the resources needed to reach them, the timeline for accomplishing them, and the strategy for documenting efforts and the level of success. Similar documents exist for each goal and subject addressed by the committees.

Another goal that is not in the SIP is the goal to achieve summary accreditation. To achieve this rating, over 66 percent of the students must receive satisfactory (vs. moderate or low) scores in both areas of the MEAP. The school currently has interim accreditation. Declines in performance on the state assessment can result in unaccreditation and takeover by the state. As of this school year, eight schools have been taken over by the state. According to the principal, this threat has caused the teachers an enormous amount of stress, but she believes that the pressure increases the motivation to set unified goals and attain them.

MEAP Information for this school is shown below.

	MATH				READING			
	Satisfactory	Moderate	Low	Examinees	Satisfactory	Moderate	Low	Examinees
1996	32.5	22.5	45.0	40.0	42.5	20.0	37.5	40.0
1995	54.4	24.6	21.1	57.0	43.9	29.8	26.3	57.0
1994	27.9	44.2	27.9	43.0	9.3	41.9	48.8	43.0
1993	5.6	36.1	58.3	36.0	22.2	33.3	44.4	36.0
1991	18.2	18.2	63.6	45.0	22.2	40.0	37.8	45.0

As can be seen in the table, there was a dramatic increase in the percentage of satisfactory ratings between 1993 and 1995 in math, and between 1994 and 1995 in reading. These increases caused us to wonder what had been done at the school and how it had been accomplished in such a short time.

Design and Methods

Our approach to this study made use of urban schools studies (Levine and Lezotte, 1990; School Improvement Program, 1990; McPartland and Slavin, 1989; Cuban, 1989; Griswold et al., 1986; Jackson, Logsdon, and Taylor, 1983; and others) and research about effective practices (Waxman, 1997; Knapp, Turnbull, and Shields, 1990; Lomotey, 1989; and others).

We relied on observations, interviews, and surveys to gather the necessary data. Observations of the kindergarten through third grade classrooms were conducted between the Spring semester of 1997 and the Spring semester of 1998. The first through third grade classrooms were observed at least twice. The focus of these observations was to record the

classroom activities and teaching practices used by the teachers. Some observations were recorded by two observers. Others were recorded individually. A coding scheme was created and all of the observations were coded by the one observer according to 1) the effective practices list compiled from the literature, and 2) the teaching strategies adopted in the SIP for the 1997 school year. (See Appendix A for the coding scheme). This coded data was subjected to examination for non-confirmatory evidence by the other two researchers involved in the project. Only coding that was agreed upon at the 100 percent level was included in the analysis.

The classroom observations served as the basis for teacher interviews. Eight of the nine first through third grade teachers were observed and interviewed. These interviews focused on teachers' perceptions of autonomy, administrative support, staff development, parent and community involvement/support, teaching methods and materials, and the creation of the School Improvement Plan. The principal interview focused on her perception of her role as principal, her assessment of the collegiality of the staff, the history of the school, parent and community support/involvement, student enrollment, student behavior, and school-district relations.

The interviews were structured and open-ended (i.e. the interviewers asked everyone the same open ended questions, but there was flexibility to pursue interesting comments made by the interviewees). Two interviewers individually conducted the interviews, each of which lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were tape recorded and notes were taken during the process. One interviewer created a list of statements that reflected the teachers collective response to the interview questions. This list was reviewed using a negative case study process where the other two researchers looked through the interviews for information that might serve as non-confirmation of these statements. (See Appendix B for list of statements used for non-confirmation evaluation). Researcher agreement with the statements was nearly percent. All conflicts were resolved through the use of a survey. Collective statements about the teachers derived from the interviews were then transferred to a survey which all nineteen of the teachers (K-6) were given the opportunity to rate for their own agreement.

On the survey, there were several background questions which gathered information about teaching experience, the number of years each teacher had been at the school, and previous experience/training in consensus building. The majority of the data came from 27 statements about the school environment and SIP creation process which teachers rated on a five point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The survey responses of the first through third grade teachers were compared to their responses to the interview questions to test the reliability of our interpretations. The responses by the K, and 4-6 teachers were compared to those of the 1-3 teachers to assess the level of representativeness of the sample which served as our focus group.

Qualitative Results

From the qualitative and quantitative results, we have developed a list of factors and activities that were important in the consensus reaching effort. Observations, interviews (teacher and principal), the district vision statement, and a teacher survey were cross-referenced to create a description of the school and surrounding community. The data indicates that the school is located in an urban setting that has suffered economic devastation due to the flight of industry to outlying areas. The aging community no longer had students in the elementary school and therefore had become less and less involved with the school over the years. Recent institution of school choice in the district increased the student body dramatically, but did not increase the number of parents in the community or the level of community involvement in the school. Efforts by the principal to attend community events, visit local churches, invite participation of community members and parents, and the creation of parent programs increased both parent and community involvement in the school, but neither the teachers nor the principal believe that parent involvement is as high as it could be.

According to the principal, school choice was accompanied by drops in achievement test scores due to acceptance of students that other schools were not willing to take. She states, "Most of the student population at the school comes from outside of the neighborhood. We take kids regardless of their test scores. We realize that this is an issue and that our performance as a

school is affected by this, but we don't turn kids away because of test scores or a previous history of behavior problems" (verbal communication, 2/28/97).

Another factor affecting test scores is the high student turnover. In the interview the principal indicated that as of Fall semester, "Only twelve of the fourth graders taking the MEAP have been at this school for three or more years. What this means is that we are testing students and being evaluated on the scores of students that we haven't even taught. Other schools are reaping the benefits of the hard work being done here, but we can't do anything about that. Our main concern is the children. We can't stop investing in them because we don't get the credit" (2/10/98). School improvement under these circumstances is especially difficult to achieve and assess.

The motto of the school is "We're Here Because We Want to Be." This quite accurately reflects the spirit of the staff and students at the school according to our observations and communications. Our observations indicate that this school has many of the features of effective schools as presented in the literature. The teachers engage in many practices highlighted in effective schools literature. As evidenced by the district vision, the SIP goals and strategies, and the interviews, this school's reform effort appears to have been grounded in the literature extensively planned. We found evidence of each of the following practices suggested in the effective schools research:

- Strong administration
- Teachers who see themselves as responsible for student learning
- Teachers who believe that they can successfully teach virtually all of their students
- Orderly and routinized (but flexible) school and classroom environments
- Flexible teaching approach
- Regular and frequent monitoring of student learning and provision of feedback
- Staff development focused on school improvement where teachers influence content
- Generous use of resources to support language arts, math, and science skill development
- Parent involvement and support of classroom and extracurricular activities

- Cooperative learning structures
- Instruction in test-taking skills

Evidence for instruction in test-taking skills, high teacher efficacy, and high teacher responsibility was gathered from teacher surveys. Evidence for strong administration, and regular/ frequent monitoring/feedback was gathered from both observations and interviews. Our observations also allowed us to evaluate the degree to which the teachers adhere to the goals and strategies they set for themselves in the SIP. While every teacher was not observed to demonstrate all of these practices, we have found that across classrooms, these practices are typical of instruction in this school. As the focus of this particular paper is the process through which teachers were able to arrive at consensus, space doesn't permit us to illustrate all of these things.

Quantitative Results

Surveys administered to 18 of the 19 regular education teachers (K-6) indicate that the teachers are experienced, that the school does not suffer from high teacher turnover, that the teachers feel supported by the principal and other teachers, that they feel responsible for student learning and believe that their students can successfully learn the material presented, that they regularly monitor student performance and provide frequent feedback to students, that they believe the environment allows them an adequate level of autonomy, that the expectations for student performance are clear, that they align their teaching to the SIP, that they believe the SIP represents a unified vision for instruction at the school, and that they believe the parents are as involved as they can afford to be, but wish that the level of involvement could increase (See Table 1).

Comparisons of the means of each of the 26 items for observed and unobserved teachers indicates that, with the exception of the question evaluating teachers preferred approach to language arts instruction, the observed and unobserved teachers responded in much the same way to all of our questions. In response to the statement "I prefer a literature based approach to

TABLE 1: SURVEY RESULTS

Average years of teaching experience	12.47				
Average years at this school	8.00				
Number stating that they received consensus training	22.20%				
The percentage of language arts lessons that emphasize SIP goals and strategies	81.50%				
The percentage of all other lessons that emphasize SIP goals and strategies	71.20%				
	%SD	%D	%N	%A	%SA
I prefer the basal approach	5.6	16.7	38.9	27.8	0
I prefer a literature based approach	0	5.6	33.3	55.6	0
I align my teaching with the School Improvement Plan	0	0	5.6	55.6	33.3
I feel responsible for student learning	0	0	0	50	44.4
I believe I can teach all of my students	0	5.6	5.6	55.6	27.8
I regularly monitor the progress of my students and give frequent feedback	0	5.6	44.4	44.4	0
I use cooperative learning	0	0	5.6	66.7	22.2
My students receive instruction in test-taking skills	0	5.6	0	61.6	22.2
I have as much control over my teaching as I would like	0	11.1	11.1	55.6	11.1
I have as much control as I would like over the materials used in my classroom	0	11.1	22.2	44.4	16.7
I receive as much support from the principal as I would like	0	0	5.6	44.4	44.4
I receive as much support from the district as I would like	0	11.1	38.9	27.8	11.1
My colleagues are friendly and helpful	0	0	5.6	27.8	61.1
I rely on my colleagues for information about teaching/learning	5.6	0	5.6	55.6	22.2
My students' parents are as involved as they can afford to be	5.6	27.8	16.7	44.4	0
My students' parents are as involved as I would like for them to be	11.1	50	5.6	27.8	0
Staff development has had a large positive impact on my teaching	0	0	33.3	61.1	0
Staff dev. is an important factor in the recent achievement gains displayed on the MEAP	0	11.1	22.2	50	5.6
The principal has been highly instrumental in the school improvement efforts	0	0	5.6	38.9	50
Parents have been highly instrumental in the school improvement efforts	5.6	33.3	33.3	22.2	11.1
Community members have been highly instrumental in the school improvement efforts	5.6	33.3	16.7	16.7	11.1
Expectations for student performance are clear	5.6	0	0	61.1	27.8
The SIP represents a unified vision for instruction at this school	0	0	5.6	72.2	5.6
My committee relied on current educational research to select strategies	0	0	22.2	50	11.1
My committee relied on experience to select strategies	0	11.1	16.7	50	5.6
	VD%	D%	N%	E%	VE%
Coming to consensus was	0	16.7	38.9	11.1	11.1

language arts instruction." the unobserved teachers selected "agree" at a significantly higher rate than the observed teachers who tended to respond that they neither agreed nor disagreed.

The Process

Based on information gained from interviews and informal conversations with the staff, we have compiled a list of factors and a description of the committee activities that contributed to the ease and swiftness with which consensus was reached.

Factors

As was expected from the reform literature, strong administrative leadership was a major factor. The existence of this factor can be credited to the district which placed the principal at this school in 1992. She was placed here specifically because they believed her leadership style would benefit this school. Factors, for which the principal is greatly responsible, are:

- 1) **increased staff collegiality.** To achieve this, the principal arranged retreats and non-work outings so that the teachers could interact with each other during leisurely activities for the purposes of stress-relief and bonding;
- 2) **increased interaction with community members.** To achieve this the principal began attending community events, visiting churches, and inviting community members and parents to join councils/groups where they could discuss their concerns/suggestions, and learn about opportunities for involvement;
- 3) **increased teacher-student identification.** To achieve this the principal arranged for all teachers to take the MEAP assessment for the grade they teach so that they could better understand what was being asked of students and remind them of the feelings associated with test-taking;
- 4) **teacher participation in the reform effort.** This was achieved by turning the SIP creation effort over to teachers so that they could feel ownership over the goals and strategies selected, and devise goals and strategies that they could reasonably be expected to carry out under the constraints they face as classroom teachers;
- 5) one of the major factors that allowed teachers to reach consensus so quickly and easily was

the high level (25% of staff) that had participated in **consensus building workshops**;

6) but what is likely the most influential factor was the **understanding that the SIP was not written in stone**. Knowing that the SIP was a living document that would be re-written each year, and revised to reflect strategies that worked well and those that did not, reduced or even eliminated heated quarrels about specific strategies for teaching (and evaluating) activities and students.

Process

The process of creating the SIP was largely determined by the teachers on each committee. The ease with which many teachers claimed to reach consensus can be attributed to the fact that the overarching goal was to increase MEAP scores. The goals suggested by the school board and the district helped to frame the specific interpretations and actions selected by the teachers. Many of the teachers credited the principals' flexible interpretation of the district and/or state goals for the ease of selecting SIP goals, and her deference to the experience of teachers for the ease with which they selected strategies. The teachers' at the school were aware of current educational research. Their decision to rely mostly on research and partially on experience meant that there was common ground from which to build when selecting specific strategies.

The high level of staff collegiality and principal support may have made the process of suggesting goals and practices less threatening than in other urban school situations. In combination with consensus training and reliance on research, the high level of collegiality seen in this school may have also increased the likelihood that all suggestions would be considered critically (i.e. evaluated objectively with relation to the goals and constraints of classroom teaching rather than in relation to feelings about the suggesting teacher).

Limitations of the Study

We believe that the observations, interviews, and surveys have allowed us to construct a pre-refrom picture of this school, and arrive at some interesting conclusions about how the obstacles plaguing many urban schools were minimized at this school. We do realize that we

cannot be certain that all of the obstacles existed before the reform effort began, but as the factors and activities carried out in this school respond to suggestions in the reform literature which are expected to be used by schools facing these and even more obstacles, we do not believe that uncertainty invalidates our conclusions. The provided examples for increasing collegiality, strengthening leadership, involving teachers in the reform effort, and increasing the likelihood of consensus can serve as a starting point, not just for urban schools facing a multitude of obstacles, but for any school that has fallen into the gap between "what to do" and "how to do it".

We would have liked to have seen the school before any attempt at reform, and during the SIP creation process. We anticipated some problems in gathering the necessary information about the process because of the post-hoc nature of the study. The nature of these problems became especially clear during the interviews. Questions about how the SIP was created often elicited responses as to what was done rather than how it was done. We made every attempt to elicit, from the interviewees, as much about the process as we could, but we realize that this is no substitute for documenting the process as it unfolds.

Suggestions for Further Study

We hope that this study has contributed at least some of the *how* to the *who* and *what* that is currently provided by urban and effective schools literature. It is not within the scope of many large scale studies to focus on the specific issues of implementing effective practices and becoming effective schools. Studies such as this, which focus on individual schools, their unique circumstances, and their successful solutions can serve as guides to other schools sharing the same or similar circumstances, in their quest for school improvement. Urban school reform efforts would be greatly facilitated by large scale studies devoted to school improvement in the face of inadequate resources, high student and teacher turnover, and lack of consensus about acceptable goals and strategies.

It is not in the power of many schools to control the level of resources or the level of turnover. It is therefore incumbent on researchers to supply reformers with information that will

allow them to operate within these constraints and to improve in spite of them. It would be especially beneficial if studies could be conducted during the process of goal and strategy selection. We expect that researchers might encounter difficulties similar to ours when attempting to identify schools on the cusp of beginning successful reforms. Reliance on achievement test scores as an indicator of effective schools makes it difficult to know where to focus our attention in order to witness the birth and development of a school improvement effort. If such a situation could be found it would be beneficial to everyone interested in breaking down barriers to urban school reform to learn about the outcomes of such studies.

Conclusions

This school had a unique advantage over many urban schools trying to reach consensus on school improvement goals and strategies. This advantage was partly derived from the strong leadership and collegial atmosphere of the school, but one factor that we believe was most influential was that nearly a quarter of the teachers had participated in a consensus training workshop. As can be seen in various characterizations of urban schools, teachers tend to be isolated from one another, and the use of standardized assessments as absolute measures of school quality tend to result in strained relations between teachers and administrators. Strained relations can result in mandates from the district or principal that teachers use particular materials and teaching methods in their classrooms.

Many reports have suggested that teachers should be allowed to participate in the selection of the materials and methods that will be used to address school improvement. Other reports discuss the difficulties of bringing together various practitioners who have up until a point, worked in almost complete isolation and with complete control. Suggestions to "increase staff collegiality" are often aimed at breaking down this isolation so that the reform process can go more smoothly, but this is not enough. In the literature, suggestions about *how* this might be done (i.e. creating activities where teachers can get to know each other in school and out) is a step towards increasing collegiality that seldom follows suggestions *that* it should be done.

Increasing collegiality is a very important step, it is not enough. Even the best of friends disagree at times. Consensus training should definitely be a part of the process if groups of people who are used to working alone are asked to come together and unify their practices.

Appendix A

Coding Scheme for Observations

- Teachers use graphic organizers in their language arts lessons
- Teachers appear to treat boys and girls equally
- Students have access to technology
- Students have access to readings of their choice
- Reading is linked to students lives and experiences
- Students are expected to use higher order reasoning skills (predicting, explaining, verifying).
- Students are praised for good work
- Students receive feedback on their work and in discussions
- Students appear interested and engaged
- Teacher appears enthusiastic about the lesson
- There are enough materials for children to have their own
- How is the class grouped?
- How many disruptions are caused by students?
- How does the teacher handle disruptions?
- Is the environment too restrictive?
- Is the environment too permissive?
- Is there structure or a routine?

Appendix B

Coding Scheme for Interviews

- Teachers have the freedom to choose their materials and teaching methods.
- Teachers feel supported by their colleagues, the administration, and parents/community members.
- Teachers believe that the principal and staff development are major influences in the recent and continued improvements.
- Teachers prefer to teach the whole class rather than using grouping.
- Teachers alter the structure of their classrooms to minimize behavior problems.
- Teachers emphasize students' responsibility for their own behavior when addressing behavior problems.
- Teachers believe that the standardized test assess necessary basic skills, but dislike the emphasis placed on the scores.
- Teachers believe that the school has a positive environment for working and learning.
- Teachers make an effort to teach all students and believe that all students can learn.
- Teachers believe that the School Improvement Plan is a good guide for instruction, and value it as a document that is rewritten and refocused each year (as more information is gathered).

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